To be beautiful, to be petted, to bear children. Such has been women's theoretical destiny and if perchance they have been ugly, hurt, and barren, that has been forgotten with studied silence...the white world has lavished its politeness on its womankind, - its chivalry and bows, its uncoverings and courtesies....From black women of America, however,...this gauze has been withheld and without semblance of apology they have been frankly trodden under the feet of men.

- W. E. B. DuBois
Quoted in No Crystal Stair
Introduction

The Colour of Virtue: Manifestations of Race-Consciousness in Morrison's Heroines

In a world where colours are important, black, white, yellow, red and brown are not just bold strokes that constitute works of art or help determine fashions of the Season. They are, unfortunately, shades that define race and identity and have, for centuries, formed the ugly basis of hatred and violence, persecution and prejudice, supremacy and subjugation. An examination in a historical perspective will reveal that the politics of colour is almost as old as civilisation itself. Because man has never lived in an achromatic or even a monochromatic world, race relations have often been strained. White men, or those who considered themselves superior because of the light colour of their skins, generally tended to look upon their darker skinned brethren as savages or slaves. Compelled, it seems, by an irresistible desire to train or subdue them, the racially “superior” captured independent continents and countries, and turned them into colonies where the natives lived as third class citizens.

In the United States of America, the situation was a little different. America, as a nation, concentrated on “training” and “civilising” some of its own people. Though the population was
predominantly white, the landscape was liberally dotted with pockets of Native Americans, pejoratively known as Red Indians. The other colour on the American geographical front was black - composed mostly of people of African descent who had been brought over as slaves, but after winning their freedom, had settled down in the land of their enslavement, and called it home.

In the twenty-first century, the kaleidoscope has turned again to form patterns and colours quite different from those of previous centuries. The population of Native Americans has decreased considerably, and is now limited to scanty Reserves in certain parts of the country. African Americans have increased in number, and are now the “largest minority” living in various cities across America, whereas Hispanic (brown) and Asian/Oriental (yellow) populations are on the rise consistently. All these cultural groups contribute, as a whole, to national enrichment in various fields. Since the Arts and Humanities that flourish in a country reflect the very ethos of the land, America can easily be viewed as a typical melting pot where various cultures exist together and lend their own flavour to the life and literature of the country.

The work of African American authors forms an integral part of the literature of the United States, and has endowed it with a distinctive richness and sense of multiculturalism. The writings of
most black authors living in the United States fall in the category of African American literature, the earliest beginnings of which can be traced back to the slave literature of Phillis Wheatley (1753 - 1784) and Frederick Douglass (1818 - 1895), as well as the politically and socially relevant writings of Booker T. Washington (1856? - 1915), and W.E.B. Du Bois (1868 - 1963). African American writing began to take a more literary and aesthetic turn with the work of Zora Neale Hurston (1891? - 1960), whose primary concern was the portrayal of the black woman's quest for identity. Some of the other notable African American writers whose prose and poetry continue to receive critical acclaim are Langston Hughes (1902 - 1967), Richard Wright (1908 - 1960), Ralph Ellison (1914 - ), Alice Walker (1944 - ), Adrienne Rich (1929 - ) and Imamu Amiri Baraka [Leroi Jones] (1934 - ) - to mention only a few. Though all these writers have highlighted, in one way or another, the black experience in white America, Toni Morrison's work stands out because of its comprehensive and multidimensional approach to the African American experience. She invents universally identifiable characters, recreates their tragic past, highlights their traumatic present, and envisions a better future for them - in an extraordinary prose style that has a power, beauty and richness all its own. It was only fitting then that the 1993 Nobel Prize Citation lauded
Morrison by describing her as a writer "who, in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality."

Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio. She graduated with a B. A. in English Literature from Howard University (Washington, D. C.) in 1953, and received her Masters Degree from Cornell University in 1955. In 1958 she married Harold Morrison - a Jamaican architect, and was divorced in 1964. Her first book, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970 when she was almost forty years old. Since then, her literary journey and subsequent rise to fame have been steady but not sudden, effortless or without struggle. *Sula* was published in 1973, and *Song of Solomon* in 1977. The latter was her first book to receive honour and recognition when it became the main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, and also won the National Book Critics Circle Award in the same year. In 1978, she was named Distinguished Writer by the American Academy of Art and Letters. Her fourth novel, *Tar Baby*, was published in 1981. In the same year Morrison was also elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, The Writer's Guild and the Author's League. In addition to this, she became the first African American woman (since Zora Neale Hurston in 1943) to be featured on the
cover of *Newsweek*. In 1986, Morrison’s play, *Dreaming Emmet* was performed in New York, and won the New York State Governor’s Art Award. *Beloved* was published in 1987, and won several awards in 1988: the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award, and the Melcher Book Award from the Unitarian Universalist Association. In 1989 Morrison won the Modern Language Association of America’s Commonwealth Award in Literature, and in 1990 was awarded the Chianti Ruffino Antico Fattore International Award in Literature. *Jazz* and *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* were published in 1992, and both appeared on the *New York Times* best seller’s list.

In 1993, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. (She has since written one other book, *Paradise*, but only the novels written before she won the Nobel Prize are examined in this thesis).

In addition to being a writer, Morrison has also had a diverse career in publishing and teaching. She has taught as a faculty member at Howard University (Washington, D. C.), University of New York (Purchase), Yale, Bard College, University of California (Berkley) and Princeton. As far as her experience in publishing is concerned, she began as a text book editor for L.W. Singer - a division of Random House, and went on to become Senior Editor for the same publishing house. While there, she had the opportunity to
publish many African American authors who are household names now: Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, Henry Dumas, and even Muhammad Ali.

Her own writing, however, both continues the African American tradition and marks a departure from it. She concentrates mainly on highlighting the predicament of the African American woman, and her themes are such that the novels have lent themselves to a variety of critical approaches. According to searches conducted on Dissertation Abstracts International, doctoral and graduate students have examined Morrison's work in various ways. Her novels have been read in light of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, womanist theories, feminist theories, literary theories, and have even been compared with the works of great writers and poets of the past like William Faulkner and

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3 Elizabeth Westhafer O'Brien, "Vocing the Loss, Restoring the Self: Female Journeys of Recreation in the Novels of Toni Morrison," DAI 55 (1995): 1957 (Drew University). O'Brien employs the literary theories of M.M. Bakhtin and Heinz Kohut's theories of self-formation and restoration to show that one of Morrison's central concerns is the African American sense of self and self formation in the face of tremendous loss.

4 Shirley F. Vines, "A Comparison of the Themes of Absalom, Absalom and Light in August by William Faulkner with Beloved and Jazz by Toni Morrison," MAI 34
William Blake. Book length critical studies of Morrison's work have also provided readings of her novels in light of a variety of topics like folklore and Marxism, to name only a few.

This thesis, however, does not attempt to read Morrison's novels in light of any pre-existing theories since enough work has already been done on that front. Basing on the Nobel Citation, rather, it seeks to show that her work not only reflects American social reality, but also helps shape it by highlighting the present multiracial nature of society, and thus encouraging it to think long and deeply about its future so that the attitudes of both black and white Americans toward one another and toward each other may change for the better. In her study of Toni Morrison's Sula, Estella Portillo's Rain of Scorpions, Maxine Hong Kingston's Woman Warrior, and E. M. Broner's Her Mothers, Elizabeth J. Ordonez writes, "the evolution of this new discourse - or the rebirth of its ancient roots - in the texts of ethnic women writers provides us, as readers, with the potential to reshape our future as we reread our
past." She begins by quoting Borges, "[each] work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future," and goes on to say that "each text explores a particular female and ethnic socio-historical identity." She continues that "the text itself becomes both the means and embodiment of modifying and reshaping female history, myths, and ultimately personal and collective identity." The texts mentioned by Ordonez have all been written by women of mixed ethnic origins - African, Hispanic, Chinese and Jamaican. Their works reflect the multiplicity of their backgrounds, and provide for the reader new perspectives on old issues related to history, culture and society. These views are very different from those presented by white (WASP) writers. The authors mentioned by Ordonez offer a new reading of the past by approaching it through their own experiences or those of their forefathers, and challenging the assumptions of Western and European writers. The Euro-centric view is thus countered, and new dimensions of American history, society and culture continue to be revealed. One hopes that these will lead to the formation of a society where equal respect and acknowledgement is given to those who are different from the norm or majority - whether it is in terms of race, colour or

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gender. Since the main characters in these books are women, the works succeed in modifying and reshaping the way we look at feminine history and myths. By tracing the course of the formation of a heroine's sensibility and consciousness, the texts also demonstrate the potential for the development of a collective identity on the cultural front - not just in America but globally as well. Morrison's work is of major significance in this respect. Her novels explore the damaging effects of assumed Western-European (white) historical, cultural and societal values on black women of all age-groups and professions. They call for the creation of more universally acceptable definitions of beauty, popularity and success - so that women do not have to undergo the trauma of watching their lives fall apart just because their features or achievements do not conform to the standards set by white America. In an essay on the work of Gayl Jones and Toni Morrison, Keith E. Byerman writes that Morrison's

rational telling of extreme events forces a radical reconsideration of commonly held assumptions about black life and black-white relationships...it defamiliarizes the reader by pointing to the violent effects of such ordinary phenomena as popular culture, bourgeois ideas about property, love, sexual initiation and sex
roles, family and the past....Her novels are quest
tales in which key characters search for the
hidden sign capable of giving them strength
and/or identity.9

Byerman's claim that Morrison's work "defamiliarizes" the reader is
apt because she situates us right in the middle of familiar
surroundings - small towns, cities, closed communities, holiday
locations - and then proceeds to shatter our assumptions of right
and wrong, success and failure, rights and duties. Though all her
characters try to find meaning in their lives as individuals, she
attributes success to those who put the community first, and who
turn to African mythology and culture to give meaning to their
lives. Where Pecola, Sula, Hagar and Jadine fail, therefore, Pilate
succeeds because she honours the sanctity of her ethnic heritage
and upholds the African world view. She demonstrates that a
woman living in contemporary America - governed by and under the
influence of white norms or laws - does have the option to forge or
strengthen her own cultural identity, and live by the guidelines of
her own race. The present study treats the novels as significant
because they highlight the condition of the average African

9 Keith E. Byerman, "Beyond Realism: The Fictions of Gayl Jones and Toni
Morrison," Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black
American woman from all walks of life (working woman, housewife, student, slave, model, cook, maid, prostitute), various age groups (school girls to grandmas) and in all relationships (grandmother, mother, sister, daughter, aunt, wife, friend, "other" woman). By creating characters symbolic of the kind of people found in mainstream America, Morrison demonstrates that the awareness of skin colour, of being black in a white world - its cultural significance and connotations - leads to the development of a certain race or colour consciousness in each heroine by virtue of her experiences and desires resulting from her interaction and confrontation with the dominant culture. This race consciousness can be both positive and negative. When it is positive, it manifests itself in a certain pride that women like Pilate feel in their inherent Africanism. It leads them to value their black selves, and to exist as confident, nurturing individuals helping others to find meaning in a hostile society permeated by the values of the dominant culture. When it is negative, however, it inspires in women like Hagar and Jadine a wish to obliterate their inherent blackness and run after elusive goals while searching for a meaningful relationship, true selfhood or genuine identity. Morrison cannot, however, be accused of writing only sociology in the garb of literature because her work is as aesthetic as it is utilitarian. The
disturbing story-lines at the core of her novels may say something about society, psychology, history or philosophy and religion but the richness and variety of her prose style is pure literature, poetry, music. In his review of Tar Baby for The New York Times Book Review, John Irving aptly comments that Morrison's "greatest accomplishment is that she has raised her novel above the social realism that too many black novels and women's novels are trapped in. She has succeeded in writing about race and women symbolically." Irving's observation is correct because Morrison's novels are not mere sociological chronicles presenting the atrocities of white society on black women and pleading for reform. They are, rather, masterpieces written specifically for black women in order to help them recognise the significance of African culture and mythology in their lives. The novels also present characters with whose experiences black people can readily identify. This focus on "blackness" does not, however, take away from the universality of the texts. The books have widespread appeal because all people

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11 Toni Morrison, "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," with Thomas LeClair, Conversations with Toni Morrison, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 120-121. In this interview, Morrison says, "I write...village literature...Peasant literature for my people....my novels...should clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not, and they ought to give nourishment."
living in societies where various cultures coexist can identify with them. They raise age-old questions in modern contexts: individuality versus the community, gender versus sex, relationships versus independence, good/right versus evil/wrong. Morrison captivates the reader's attention by depicting heroines caught in the rigmarole of everyday life. Each aspires to a goal, and finishes with a greater understanding of life and its complicated issues. Each heroine is aware of a revelation at the end, and changes because of her experience, attitude, or flaws. The second focus of this thesis, therefore, is on Morrison's redefinition of the word "tragic," and her creation of characters who can easily be viewed as contemporary tragic heroines. These heroines do not have much in common with their classical sisters, but they do demonstrate an occasional error of judgement or "hamartia." Morrison herself says in the interview with LeClair\textsuperscript{12} that her characters undergo catharsis and experience revelation - a certain new knowledge or understanding that they lacked at the time of their conception. These heroines do not come from royal or privileged families or backgrounds, and are neither exceedingly beautiful (with one exception - Jadine) nor unimaginably rich.

\textsuperscript{12}Toni Morrison, LeClair, "The Language Must Not Sweat" 125. Morrison says, "I write what I suppose could be called the tragic mode in which there is some catharsis and revelation...my inclination is in the tragic direction. Maybe it's a consequence of my being a classics minor."
Their origins and experiences are such that they become identifiable not just to Americans or African Americans but to majority and minority cultures the world over. They articulate concerns that reflect the pre-occupations of the contemporary woman, and are often trapped in circumstances or dilemmas women all over the world find themselves in. The pain that each heroine experiences is varied and diverse from that of others, yet is excruciatingly private and immensely universal at the same time. This thesis attempts to show that each heroine's unmitigated awareness of being black in a white world both determines and shapes her perception of life, and renders her tragic.

Because Morrison highlights, through the medium of her books, the black female experience in white, male centred America, African American girls and women living in a hostile Euro-American culture form the basis of her novels. All her heroines, therefore, exhibit an intense and singular consciousness of their race, class and colour. This race consciousness leads to the formation of unique individual sensibilities that determine how a particular character will develop as a person, and what values she will eventually pass on to her family and community. Such an approach is crucial to any study of Morrison's work because she constantly stresses the importance of grandmother-mother-
daughter-granddaughter relationships as well as the role of ancestors in the development of both a unified, balanced personality and a strong community. In a deeply provocative and insightful essay Barbara Christian comments that

the development of Afro-American women's fiction is, in many instances, a mirror image of the intensity of the relationship between sexism and racism in this country. And while many of us may grasp this fact in terms of economics or social status, we often forget the toll it takes in terms of self-expression and therefore self-empowerment. To be able to use the range of one's voice, to attempt to express the totality of self, is a recurring struggle in the tradition of these writers from the nineteenth century to the present.13

Christian points out that the depiction of the relationship between sexism and racism, which often characterises the work of African American women, must not be viewed merely as social realism. It must, rather, be seen as an attempt toward self-expression and, through it, self-empowerment. Nowhere is this more clearly

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demonstrated than in the novels of Morrison where each heroine tries to fulfil a desire which, she believes will, at once, give expression to her true self, and empower her at the same time. Pecola, therefore, searches for a pair of the bluest eyes in the world - which, she believes, will make her the envy of all others. Sula quests for an independent self that will make her feel unconstrained and strong. Hagar thirsts for Milkman's love thinking that it will give her a true sense of fulfilment. Jadine looks for an exclusive identity so that she can be self-sufficient without the need to turn to her community or African culture.

Each chapter of this thesis presents a study of the race-conscious tragic heroines of a particular novel, examines their desires and character flaws, traces the ups and downs of their life, seeks to show how and why they become tragic during the course of events, highlights the similarities and differences between them, and attempts to rationalise their actions or behaviour in light of the specific context of their situations. It also seeks to demonstrate that each heroine responds and reacts differently to being a disadvantaged minority in a privileged majority society.

In *The Bluest Eye*, for example, Pecola is consumed by self-hatred for her black self - especially her black eyes. Tortured day and night by the thought that she does not have blue eyes, she
ultimately goes mad in her search for these traditionally coveted tickets to beauty, acceptance and love. Claudia's consciousness of her race, on the other hand, leads to a detestation of all that is white - whether it is a doll or one of her own school fellows. Both girls demonstrate an awareness of colour and class, but only Pecola becomes tragic because she articulates one of the central concerns of all minorities - how long can a sub-culture continue to be mercilessly dominated, judged and harassed by the majority culture? As the book traces the development of her sensibility through the damage done to her psyche, her hamartia or error of judgement emerges as her desire for blue eyes (an unattainable goal) which leads ultimately to the loss of her sanity, and reduces her to the state of a vegetable - living but not really alive. Claudia, on the other hand, moves toward the realisation that finally comes to her at the end of the book - a certain awareness about society as it is at present, and the emotional harm it can do to an individual.

In Sula, Sula Peace grows up in the closed, black community of the Bottom but leaves it in search of a college education - only to return an unpopular rebel ten years later. She realises that the status of pariah has been conferred on her because she has not behaved like a typical black woman of the time. Nel Wright, on the other hand, is the picture of conformity. She knows what the
traditional roles of a black woman are - and performs them automatically. She thinks, feels and suffers like an African American - and never deviates from that path even in the midst of the hardest of times. Both Sula and Nel are confronted with experiences that are very different, and both approach life with attitudes distinct from those of each other. Sula voices the concerns of all women in general and the black woman in particular: should a woman live in conformity with her community and culture - blindly following its rules, regulations and restrictions - even at great personal risk and the cost of her own happiness? Though critics tend to see Sula as a failure because she returns to the Bottom even though she had initially shunned its limiting confines to become truly independent, Morrison sees her as a triumphant character who only fails because she cannot become part of the larger, sustaining community that provides courage and conviction to its members.14 (Morrison also depicts, at the same time, the hypocrisy inherent in the entire Bottom community). Sula’s error of judgement emerges in her fierce desire to be independent and alone (‘‘I want to make myself’’) - to do her own thing with total disregard

14 Toni Morrison, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," with Nellie McKay, Gates and Appiah 407. In this interview Morrison says, “Sula’s return to Medallion can be seen as a defeat for her in the eyes of some critics, because they assume that the individual, alone and isolated, making his or her way, is a triumphant thing. With black people, her return may be seen as a triumph and not a defeat, because she comes back to where she was at the beginning.”
for another's feelings - and to feel superior to and contemptuous of society by being separated from it. This persistent stubbornness ultimately leads to total ostracism by the Bottom community, leaving her alone, unwanted, and uncared-for even in the midst of sickness and death.

Of all the female characters in Song of Solomon, Pilate alone takes pride in the rich heritage of her ethnic tradition and wishes to pass it on to others in her extended family - especially Milkman. Contrasted with her is her grand-daughter - Hagar - insipid and insecure, who blames her miseries on others, and hates herself because Milkman does not find her attractive. First Corinthians feels like a misfit because she is richer and better educated than other black women, but looks for concrete ways in which to assert her individuality. Her sister Lena, however, accepts her sordid fate, and makes no attempt to get out of the rut she is in. Though these female characters are brilliantly drawn and worthy of critical attention, it is Milkman, the central character of Song of Solomon, who emerges as the tragic hero. His dilemma is universal: how far should an individual go in quest of his identity and roots? This question is especially significant for African Americans and other minorities who may have descended from ancestors who lived unrecorded lives in long forgotten places, and whose names could
not be written down. Though Milkman's aim is noble, his *hamartia* is the single-mindedness of his vision combined with a certain immaturity and greed that temporarily takes away from the significance of his mission. Toward the end of the novel, however, he attains a certain grandeur because he is successful in his search, gains a new maturity because of it, and leaps into the air with the confidence of a man who is sure that he can fly - even if it is a flight unto death.

Jadine, the heroine of *Tar Baby*, is a graduate of the Sorbonne, and a successful model. She utilises her colouring and hair to full effect. Dubbed the "Copper Venus" by fashion magazines, her race-consciousness manifests itself only in the presence of other black women with whom she cannot identify. She feels alienated and alone in the midst of the very society she rightfully belongs to - if not by association - at least by birth and upbringing. Jadine becomes a contemporary tragic heroine during the development of her race and class consciousness because she articulates a central concern felt by most members of a new multicultural generation: is it wrong to aspire for a goal that would essentially alienate one from one's origins and roots? Her error of judgement mutates into the inability to make up her mind about what she really wants - total submersion into white culture, or a
gradual acculturation back into the black sub-culture through association with Son. Even though she is materially successful, therefore, she fails to find the emotional satisfaction she desires because she is unable to bring about a balance between her two lifestyles.

The story of *Beloved* revolves around a mother - Sethe, and her daughters - Denver and Beloved (the grown-up ghost of the baby girl Sethe had killed to protect from slavery). The presence of Baby Suggs (Sethe's mother-in-law) is also crucial to the narrative because it helps to demonstrate how three generations of African American women dealt with slavery and its bloody after-effects. Both Baby Suggs and Sethe realise that their initiation into slavery was a direct consequence of their being black. Denver and Beloved, who do not know what slave life was like, urge their mother to tell them the stories of her life on the Plantation. It is mainly through Beloved's haunting presence and persistence that Sethe is finally able to rethink her past, dwell on her African connections, and pass on the important values of her race to Denver. Sethe's quest for physical and emotional freedom and her willingness to go to any extent to obtain it, and protect her family from slavery, lends a certain nobility to her character, and renders her tragic. Her *hamartia* is her inability to come to terms with her past, to relate to
her daughters the terrible events of her enslaved life and the death
of young Beloved ("it was not a story to pass on"). Even though she
had become physically free of the chains of slavery, her emotional
enslavement continued and acted as a deterrent to her finding the
happiness she desired. Ironically, it is only after she succeeds in
passing on the story that Beloved's ghost is finally laid to rest, and
Sethe, Denver and Paul D begin life on a new note after exorcising
the ghosts of the past.

Violet Trace, the heroine of Jazz, is conscious not only of her
colour but also her age. Her husband Joe had fallen in love with
Dorcas - a light skinned, high school girl, and then murdered her
because she went to a dance with someone else. Violet goes to the
funeral and tries to disfigure the face of the dead girl lying in the
coffin. Her attempt is thwarted, but she comes to be known as
"Violent" after the incident. Her character takes on tragic
proportions because even though the longing for marital bliss may
seem like a narrow concern, it is a valid desire with which women
and men the world over can identify. Violet's tragic flaw is her
inferiority complex and a feeling of inadequacy that leads to an
insecurity about her own self. This chapter seeks to show how black
women survive on very little hope and how much they struggle to
overcome their inadequacies and limitations - both as individuals
and as a community.

It is significant that in all these novels, Morrison never depicts white society or white characters as actively condemning, criticising, or harming the black woman in any way. With the exception of Tar Baby, in fact, none of her novels have any significant white characters. She demonstrates, very subtly, that the black community itself blindly internalises, absorbs and adheres to all the ideals presented by white society, and judges its members according to them. This can best be termed as secondary racism - prejudice which emanates not from the primary source (white society) but from a secondary source (the black community). One sees, therefore, that black matrons, gentlemen and children alike condemn Pecola and Hagar because they are ugly by white standards, and both detest themselves because their looks do not conform to white concepts of beauty. Hagar and Jadine pursue goals and seek to define themselves according to white analogues. Sethe tries to find an identity as a freed black within a black community that views her as an outcast. Violet Trace attempts to have a trouble-free, happy home and family life - in spite of the fact that most people in her community view her as a mad woman.

Morrison's characters are contemporary race conscious tragic heroines because their psyches and sensibilities develop through
their confrontation with the ruling values of the modern world. Whatever they want at a personal level signifies something larger than life at the universal level. Their desires - whether for blue eyes, a self, an identity, happiness, freedom, or marital bliss - are ultimately symbolic of a larger need felt by people the world over. Their concerns become the concerns of humanity, and their lives have meaning because they are lived in pursuit of noble goals which might seem selfish at first but ultimately come to represent the struggles of the past that sometimes threaten to continue into the future as well.

The conclusion of the thesis sums up the points discussed in previous chapters, presents an overview of the reasons why race consciousness is such an important part of the psyche of Morrison's characters, and provides a final comment on the larger significance of the bitter portrait of America painted by Morrison in her novels. The study of the race consciousness of Morrison's characters is significant also because these heroines represent, as it were, all minorities on the cultural landscape of America. The Indian, Chinese, Spanish, Latin American and countless other experiences find an echo in the travails and trauma, happiness and heartbreak of people like Pecola, Sula, Pilate, Hagar, Jadine, Sethe and Violet. In her article "Race, Sex and Self: Aspects of the Bildung in Select
Novels by Black American Women Writers," Sondra O'Neal writes that the aim of Black American women writers has been to make the fiction more compatible with actual black female experience in this country. While their novels are concerned with race, the works are more than just chronicles of oppression and rejection. In seeking self-discovery, heroines must struggle with issues of not only race, skin color, and sex, but of procreation, Black feminine images inherited from mothers, and often despicable expectations for Black women preordained by society.\(^{15}\)

O'Neal contends that African American women writing today are making efforts to create characters more identifiable to black American women. The issues these works deal with are those that confront heroines and citizens alike: is there a proper way of behaving or acting if one belongs to a certain race, has a certain skin colour, or is female? What happens when a woman acts differently from the way that she is expected to? Does a woman belonging to a minority culture err when she aspires to define herself according to majority standards and goes in pursuit of goals?

disapproved of by her own community? In Morrison's work, the answers are never clear-cut or straight. The endings are always ambiguous and inspire debate. The portrayal of her female characters and their victimisation is enough to make one wonder if the notion of America as a nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal will ever hold true for African Americans and other minorities living there. The achievements of Morrison and, ultimately, those of her heroines, all of whom are black, and women, in a male dominated white world, suggest that this proposition may not be so ridiculous after all - that these women have just as much right to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness as any other person living on American soil.

As focus shifts, in the contemporary world, from “white” writers to “coloured” ones, new research too must look toward alternative topics that better reflect these changing trends. European and Western white literature has already experienced some of its finest moments, and reached unprecedented zeniths of popularity. It is now crumbling, and out of its ashes a new literature is rising - a literature that owes as much to the Third World as it does to the ethnic populations or sub-cultures of North America and Europe. The research undertaken during the writing of this thesis will be a recognition of the fact that African American
writers are not just shadows falling across white America. They are, in fact, dynamic, vital beings with the power to change present prejudice and mould a bias-free future for the generation to come.
Review of Critical Literature

For an author who has written only seven novels and published just one collection of essays so far, Toni Morrison's work has generated a tremendous amount of criticism. Writers, scholars, critics and journalists all over the world - from North America to Asia, From Africa to Europe - have contributed essays, reviews, articles and theses about this Nobel Prize winning author and her books.

With a few simple strokes of her pen, Morrison seems to have revolutionised the whole concept, tradition and style of African American writing. Because she was hailed as being unique, original and versatile, the canon of Morrison criticism includes material that is as varied and diverse as the novels themselves. In the literature reviewed here, an attempt has, therefore, been made to include a wide variety of available criticism. This will ensure that different aspects of Morrison's work - ranging from the female protagonists in her novels to the folk tradition inherent in her writing - are all aptly summed up and discussed. The articles, essays and books are arranged novel-wise, and in chronological order by publication date to enable the reader to understand the whole body of Morrison criticism as it has evolved, developed and changed throughout the years.
The Bluest Eye

Writing as early as 1977, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, in his article “Order and Disorder in The Bluest Eye [Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction 19 (1977): 112-120] looks upon Morrison's first book as a novel structured in triadic patterns depicting the tragic condition of blacks in racist white America. Their condition is tragic because all the white American ideals are unattainable for the black man - symbolised by the idealism of the primer contrasted with the brutal reality of Pecola's life. Blacks suffer severe psychological repercussions because of white oppression which forces dominant standards of beauty on them. He blames both blacks and whites for Pecola's obsessive desire for blue eyes because right from her childhood she has been made to play with toys and admire movie stars that uphold the values of the white world. Ogunyemi also suggests that the bluest eye can be a pun on “the bluest I” - which he sees as the “gloomy ego,” “the black man feeling very blue from the psychological bombardment he is exposed to from early life to late.” By extension, therefore, the novel becomes, for Ogunyemi, “a blues enunciating the pain of the black man in America and an attempt to grapple with the pain which is sometimes existential.” He labels the Soaphead episode as an indictment against the black man who “fails to be his brother's
keeper.” He sees Geraldine’s cat, Soaphead’s dog, and Pecola as the scapegoats meant to “cleanse” American society by undergoing “violent rituals.” These sacrifices are, however, meaningless because they fail to cleanse society: the death of the cat does nothing to improve the relationship between Geraldine and her son; the death of the dog does not give Pecola her blue eyes, and Pecola’s physical sacrifice at the hands of her father does not exorcise the humiliation of his first sexual encounter. Ogunyemi finds only one weakness in The Bluest Eye - the fact that Morrison lets Calvin Hernton’s book, Sex and Racism in America, rule her work without distancing herself from it - so that the novel becomes a mere fictionalisation of the sociological factors that govern Hernton’s treatise.

Unlike Ogunyemi who sees The Bluest Eye as a blues song, Phyllis R. Klotman views it as a Bildungsroman in her article “Dick-and-Jane and the Shirley Temple Sensibility in The Bluest Eye” [Black American Literature Forum 13 (1979): 123-25]. According to her, the book is about growing up young, black and female in a society conditioned by white values. She contends that the dominant theme of the novel is education by the school and society - symbolised respectively by the Dick-and-Jane Reader and Shirley Temple. The school primer paints a tempting and inviting
picture of the white world, and the child star represents the ultimate in beauty and attractiveness. Klotman attributes Pecola's destruction to this lopsided view of life because, like other black children, she can neither identify with that kind of a family set-up, nor with the fair-complexioned, golden-haired good looks of Shirley Temple. The author suggests that Pecola dies a "psychic death" because her surroundings, her school, and her family succeed only in teaching her that she is "black, poor, and ugly" - and does not have any of the attributes that society values. Klotman reasons that because goodness, truth and beauty are all epitomised in the figure of Shirley Temple, black children feel that in order to be accepted by society they too should emulate that style. Pecola's existence is therefore twice denied - by the primer which depicts only white family life, and by herself because she wants to negate her own being in favour of a Shirley Temple look-alike. Klotman notes the absence of a much needed reader series depicting black lifestyles - school books that would present a positive picture of the black world to black children, and make them understand its true worth and value. The only one that she came across was disappointing because it imitated white values. She concludes that if African Americans are to grow up balanced and sane, society must establish more neutral norms of goodness and beauty - or at
least ones that the black population can better identify with.

Differing only slightly from Klotman’s point of view, Ruth Rosenberg, in the article “Seeds in Hard Ground: Black Girlhood in The Bluest Eye [Black American Literature Forum 21 (1987): 435-445] reads The Bluest Eye as an initiation story quite unlike any other - firstly - because it lays emphasis on a girl’s coming of age in a culture which has traditionally only appreciated tales of the young boy’s road to manhood, and secondly, because the heroine is extremely dark-skinned as opposed to her other literary counterparts who are either light complexioned or almost white. She contends that Morrison presents a thematic redefinition of beauty in this book by caricaturing Maureen Peal, and by creating Claudia - the girl who insists upon creating her own identity as a black woman in spite of the images of whiteness constantly thrust upon her by society. Pecola, however, becomes a victim of self-hatred because she learns to devalue herself by holding up for comparison such existing models of beauty as Shirley Temple, Mary Jane and Maureen Peal. Rosenberg asserts that through its rendering of Pecola’s tragic tale, the novel explores the “hard ground,” i.e. the “world that permits the foreclosure of childhood, (and) imposes a premature adulthood.” She quotes sociologist Joyce A. Ladner who theorises that adolescent black girls grow
emotionally mature faster than their white counterparts because they experience extreme violence, either personally or vicariously, at a very young age, and thus develop survival skills which enable them to deal better with the world around them. Rosenberg's thesis, however, is not very convincing because Pecola, who suffers the most, learns no survival skills, and goes mad instead of maturing faster into an adult. Though "Seeds in Hard Ground" touches upon many of the issues informing The Bluest Eye, Rosenberg fails to develop and support her ideas fully - with the result that the article appears incomplete and seems to end abruptly.

Like the above-mentioned critics, Jane Kuenz too highlights the effects of the hegemony of the dominant majority culture on the minor sub-culture, but her article "The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity" [African American Review 3 (1993): 421-431] examines the book more from a historical and cultural point of view rather than a sociological or psychological one. Kuenz asserts that the book aptly demonstrates how black female bodies and African American experiences have traditionally been encroached and colonised by a "seemingly hegemonic white culture." This invasion has lead to the erasure of "specific local bodies, histories, and cultural productions" -
especially where sexuality “intersects” with commodity culture. Examining Pecola’s case, Kuenz suggests that a person not represented in the mass culture either tries to abandon her true self or see that self in the body of another. She cites as example, the white baby dolls, the Shirley Temple cups, the Mary Jane candies and Maureen Peal’s clothes - in which Pecola tries to imagine herself. She holds the film industry primarily responsible for projecting these fixed iconographic images of femininity and beauty that do not allow more identifiable alternative images to emerge and flourish. Both Pecola and Pauline suffer as a result of this because they do not find in themselves and their families the beauty that they so desperately seek. For Pauline it leads also to a foreclosure of sexual pleasure because she does not possess the “strength, beauty and youth” as defined by the films that govern her life. Pecola, too, experiences sexual pleasure only when she eats the Mary Jane candies, and imagines herself as the white and cute Mary Jane. Kuenz suggests that these erasures of Pecola’s body and sexuality ultimately result in her madness and isolation.

**Sula**

Barbara Lounsberry and Grace Ann Hovet begin the article “Principles of Perception in Toni Morrison’s Sula” ([Black American Literature Forum](https://example.com) 13 (1979): 126-129) by highlighting the major
dilemma confronting American blacks as explored by Morrison in *Sula*: “How can Afro-Americans today preserve some vestige of vital cultural identity from the past and, at the same time, move...toward the multiple perspectives and opportunities of cultural pluralism?” They suggest that Morrison offers, through the character of Sula, new perspectives on feminine reality - holding them up for comparison with the traditional “ordering principles” of the people of the Bottom. Sula represents a rejection of traditional notions of feminine respectability like family, marriage, children, grandparental care, sexual mores, and the concept of a steady job. She refuses to see women as only wives and mothers. Referring to male characterisation in *Sula*, Lounsberry and Hovet contend that Morrison presents men as “diminished” to enable us to reconsider the traditional view that all men are “heroic and powerful,” as well as to suggest that American society does not provide the black man enough space to grow and develop. This “homogeneity of the stunting male experience” is represented by the deweys. The authors laud Morrison for identifying the limitations of both old and new perspectives, and recognising that perspectives alone cannot guarantee cultural pluralism - new visions must have a meaningful outlet - like artistic expression. Lounsberry and Hovet do, however, criticise Morrison because she does not offer any solutions toward
the resolution of the conflict between the new and the old.

As opposed to Lounsberry and Hovet, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi takes a somewhat different perspective. In the article “Sula: A Nigger Joke” [Black American Literature Forum 13 (1979): 130-133] he sees as Morrison’s primary aim a wish to “uplift” the reader who too is a victim of the unfulfilled dream. Borrowing Morrison’s phrase, he reads the novel as a “Nigger joke” because the supposed villainess, Sula, turns out to be a heroine whose behaviour not only has a positive effect on the community but also gives Nel a deeper understanding of her own self. whereas Nel, the assumed heroine, emerges a villainess - the original “witch” and “devil.” He interprets her name to mean “knell”- drawing people closer to “sadness, doom, or hell.” He observes that Sula calmly watches her mother burn to death because she has been taught to do so by Nel after the Chicken Little episode. What Ogunyemi overlooks, however, is the fact that Sula’s actions benefit the community only by chance, and not because of any deliberate attempt on her part, whereas Nel actually tries to be of some use to others. Thematically, he sees the novel as highlighting the position of the black woman - which he claims has remained unchanged through generations: she is deserted by black men. and generally left to fend for herself. Ogunyemi finds that Sula looks inward on
the "imitative" and "artificial" nature of black life rather than focusing on white racism. He is of the opinion that Morrison demonstrates, through the characters of Nel and Sula, the elements that separate blacks from the white world, and exposes, in the characterisation of the Wrights, the hypocrisy of the black middle class.

Though Karen F. Stein looks upon Sula as a novel written in the epic tradition rather than a mere "joke," she agrees with Ogunyemi that Morrison highlights the lives of those whose dreams have been deferred. In the article "Toni Morrison's Sula: A Black Woman's Epic" [Black American Literature Forum 18 (1984): 146-150] she writes that Morrison's books, set against a background of mythic narrative structure, catalogue the frustration of the hopes and plans of black characters by whites and by fate. She finds that Sula, especially, is firmly rooted in the epic tradition but the ironic reversals of epic expectations inherent in it also allow it to create a new definition of heroism to encompass the lives of black women. Comparing Morrison's contemporary novel with the traditional epic style, Stein observes that whereas the epic hero embarks on a perilous journey, and returns to restore order to a fallen world, Sula's quest is an inward quest through which she gains only a sad knowledge of her own alienation and loss. She interprets Sula's
final speech as symbolising the distance between the ideal of epic regeneration and the impossibility of redemption in the fallen world of modern America. Stein sees only Nel as enacting the epic promise of renewal - but contends that she does not attain the epic realisation of the mythic hero. Comparing other aspects of the epic with Sula, she interprets the black community’s struggle for survival against whites as the epic struggle between life and death. She also looks upon Nel’s and Sula’s choices as representing the range of options available to black women in modern America as well as the difficulties of survival in a hostile world.

Vashti Crutcher Lewis brings a fresh perspective to her reading of Sula in the essay “African Tradition in Toni Morrison’s Sula” [Phylon 48 (1987): 91-97]. She finds in the novel a reflection of “…the African point of view - an African aesthetic” - a fact made especially clear by the highly significant names used by Morrison in the novel. Shadrack and Sula represent a traditional West African water priest and water priestess respectively. The birthmark on Sula’s eye also signifies African tradition since West African water priestesses often had hierarchical body markings of water creatures on their person. She contends further that unlike the West, where neither Sula nor Shadrack find acceptance, they would be welcomed in their original homeland - Africa, because nobody would view
them as pariahs or mysteries. Another theme in *Sula* that represents African tradition is the drowning of Chicken Little - which symbolises a sacrifice to the river god - a practice quite common in Africa. Nel's sense that Sula is somewhere near the river during Eva's funeral also indicates African tradition which believes that spirits linger in desolate places like fields, forests, ravines and grave-yards. Sula's and Shadrack's power, reversed in traditional West African culture, is apparent in the confusion, pain and even death that comes to people who have criticised or harassed the two. Lewis claims toward the end that the violent deaths of several of the Bottom inhabitants on National Suicide Day are symbolic of the killing of memories of deferred dreams in racist America. She cites relevant research to conclude that the cosmology and world view of African Americans is distinctly African though the community is not always conscious of it. She appreciates Morrison for recognising African tradition in African American culture, and thus attempting to explain what makes Black folk act the way they do.

**Song of Solomon**

Since *Song of Solomon* has at its centre a male hero, none of the articles surveyed were found to deal directly with the female characters in the novel. Most examine and analyse, quite
understandably, the meaning of the quest undertaken by Milkman who embarks on a journey of a lifetime in search of his past and, by extension, his true self and identity. A few articles have, however, been reviewed here to give the reader a general idea of the existing criticism on Morrison's third book. The sections dealing specifically with the female characters have been examined in greater detail.

Robert James Butler, in the article "Open Movement and Selfhood in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon" [Centennial Review 28-29 (1984-85): 58-75] contends that Morrison's fiction reflects the long, rich tradition of the journey motif common to both American and African American fiction. He contrasts this with European and English literature in which the protagonist achieves a state of "completed being" - as opposed to the open-endedness of American and African American fiction where she/he moves only toward a state of "endless becoming" eventually culminating in "unlimited personal development." Butler establishes that Morrison's fiction embodies the "search for human liberation through open movement" which, symbolised by "soaring" and "flying," has the potential to both destroy and liberate. He sees Song of Solomon as a novel that juxtaposes the "possibilities of space" with the "securities of place." According to him, the journey motif plays a significant role in the novel because most of the scenes portraying character growth deal
with various kinds of open motion leading to "expanded possibilities" and "deepened awareness." Though the article examines in great detail the meaning and implications of Milkman's journey, the author, nevertheless, devotes some space to the importance of the journey motif for the female characters of the novel as well. Pilate's journeys are, of course, the most crucial. Like Milkman's journey South, hers is also "open" because she does not seek out any particular place or destination deliberately. Her free movements "enliven" her humanity and bless her with a liminal status so that she both remains in touch with society, and away from its "contaminations." She is thus able to transcend the "stagnant thinking" which ails the minds of other characters. Even though she lives slightly outside of society, her actions benefit humanity - so that her name, Pilate, instead of epitomising her death-giving namesake of the Bible, comes more to symbolise a pilot who steers people to health and happiness. In spite of the fact that he had earlier mentioned Corinthians's local journey, Butler contends that Ruth, Lena and Corinthians all remain "landlocked" - mostly because of the physical restrictions placed upon them by Macon Dead. Ruth, especially, is seen by him as a peacock woman completely weighed down by her fine plumage and unable to fly at all. Only in Pilate does he see a merging of the best that the world
has to offer - "the stabilities of place and the fluid possibilities of space."

The traditional approach of Butler's article is countered by the radical nature of James W. Coleman's article "Beyond the Reach of Love and Caring: Black Life in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon" [Obsidian II 1.3 (1986): 151-161]. Coleman suggests that the various ways (creative, imaginative, practical) in which black people respond to severe oppression lead inevitably to extremely destructive behaviour that forms a kind of "unbreakable cycle in the black community." He thus disagrees with critics who view the end of the novel as a positive thing portraying hope for uplifting the black community. He allows that Milkman's quest is in the tradition of other mythic quests, but contends that it places him on such an unreachable plane that the black community cannot identify with, understand, or utilise his experience. Even when he returns to Pilate, dizzy with the success of his journey, he fails to influence the black community positively because Hagar, the member of that community who needed him most, and was most devastated by his attitude, is dead. His quest also fails to inspire his father Macon whose survival skills lead to the dissolution of his personality and endow it with a callous attitude which is very harmful to the black community of which he is a member. Though
he lives an affluent life - inaccessible to other blacks - he does so at the cost of his own community's prosperity and well-being. Coleman finds that Black women in the novel are even more vulnerable to destruction. Their entire life is characterised by a "passive endurance" required to live with a husband or father like Macon, and a society whose most coveted avenues are closed to them. Ruth's forced acceptance of her fate leads to such abnormal behaviour as necrophilia - demonstrated by her nightly trips to her father's grave, and her continued breast-feeding of Milkman beyond the normal age. Like other critics, Coleman sees only Pilate as someone who manages to survive whole and sane. Agreeing partly with Butler, he too observes that she lives on the periphery of society, but whereas the former sees her actions as beneficial to the community, Coleman argues that she cannot influence it enough to help it to survive or prevent self destruction. In that sense, therefore, she is not much different from Milkman whose journey and flight, in the end, liberate only him as an individual and do nothing at all for the black community.

Taking a stand quite different from that of Coleman's, Harry Reed's article "Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon and Black Cultural Nationalism" [The Centennial Review 32 (1988): 50-64] presents the theory that all of Morrison's novels have a definitive cultural
nationalist thrust which most of her critics have continually overlooked. He is of the opinion that by examining the lives of black female characters, black women writers provide a very satisfying yet disturbing interpretation of black culture. Following in this tradition is Morrison's Song of Solomon - a novel that pleads for the regeneration of the black community from within so that it both affirms and criticises Black Cultural Nationalism. He sees in the work a "reverence" for black women and their entire network. Morrison's triumph lies in the fact that she never idealises or romanticises the harsh circumstances of her characters, yet depicts their moments of triumph as and when they occur. Reed views Pilate, Ruth and Circe as nationalist archetypes. Pilate's intimacy with nature, her magic and wisdom demonstrate her inherent though unconscious Africanism. Circe's affinity to her past and her ability to use it in the modern present represents the ability of black women to survive the horrors of slavery. Unlike these two women, Ruth does not undergo any revolutionary change. She awakens slowly but steadily. The change and adjustment in her life is demonstrated in her anger against her son, and when she coerces Macon to pay for Hagar's funeral. These females are not just important in themselves, however. They play a phenomenal role in the realisation of Milkman's quest because they continue to love,
support, guide, and even reject him when required. Reed indicates that Ruth draws attention to her subjugation by pointing out her oppression by the black males in her life rather than white society. He asserts that Morrison presents a new view of black life by highlighting in her work the black woman's quest for selfhood, autonomy and growth. He thus sees her as envisioning a black society with the black woman as its generative force but not a matriarchy. Pilate, the embodiment of this generative force, "gives black women strength and black men freedom." He concludes that Song of Solomon is a Pan-African novel which shows that survival in the future depends on how successfully you keep the faith and preserve the past.

Tar Baby

In the article "The Quest for Wholeness in Toni Morrison's Tar Baby" [Black American Literature Forum 20 (1986): 63-73] James Coleman examines Tar Baby in light of the general question posed by Morrison's first three novels: "whether the triumph of the community,...and immersion in the sources of natural and primitive can only be achieved outside the scope of the lives of most twentieth-century blacks?" He finds that she answers the question unsatisfactorily because the book neither suggests that black characters should live by clearly defined black folk values in the
context of a white world nor that they must become increasingly sophisticated in the white Western sense. Son, the embodiment of black folk values, fails as a modern twentieth-century man while Jadine, despite her anti-folk values, appears to know how to survive and succeed. This seems to imply that folkways have no practical value in the modern world - a stance which is at odds with Morrison's world view. Coleman argues that Morrison neither clarifies the place of white Western values in the value system of late twentieth-century blacks, nor explores fully the options available to Son - a "twentieth-century black man burdened with black cultural tradition" and Jadine - a "twentieth-century black woman who has reverted to negative white Western values." His opinion diverges a bit from those of other critics when he finds that Morrison fails to convince the reader that Eloë is an ideal town. He interprets Son's departure from there to mean that it was too limited a community which stunted his growth because its folk tradition failed to be meaningful in the context of a changing twentieth-century reality. Similarly, in a radically different approach from most critics who idealise Therese as a nurturing and guiding force, Coleman sees her, Gideon and Alma Estee as people who have been so overpowered by modern American ideas that they no longer find respite in old traditions.
Angelita Reyes expresses views totally opposite to those of Coleman in the article “Ancient Properties in the New World: The Paradox of the Other in Toni Morrison’s Tar Baby” [The Black Scholar 17.2 (1986): 19-25]. She suggests that the main theme of the book is Morrison’s plea to the Black people of the New World diaspora to acknowledge their African consciousness, and cling firmly to their ancient properties. She interprets these ancient properties to mean the “sacred and psyche-cultural bonds of a past that has its center in the traditions of Africa.” Reyes suggests that through the paradox of the “Other,” Morrison connects the archetype of the earth mother (tar lady) with the object of the “other” i.e. Jadine - a pariah who becomes the “useful conscience” of the New World Community, and shows it what it does not need. Reyes contends that Morrison employs the folk tale by Joel Chandler Harris to depict the necessity for “holistic survival in a modern world where...racism is a constant reminder of the slave history and exploitation of people of color in the Americas.” She argues that Morrison presents two uses of the quality of tar: as the tar baby, Jadine represents false bonding and false values, but tar is also a symbol of positive bonding, and indicates those things in the African diaspora which people of colour need for cultural cohesiveness. The tar motif, therefore, becomes a metaphor for
entrapment as well as for bonding things. Reyes is of the opinion that this nature of tar, as it is presented in *Tar Baby*, accounts for the fact that though Jadine is the central figure, it is ultimately the tar lady who comes to represent “self-confirming black womanhood.”

Jan Furman moves on to an entirely different focus in the essay “Community and Cultural Identity: *Tar Baby*” [Toni Morrison’s Fiction (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996) 49-66]. She explores Morrison’s use of the “point of view inside” which prevents stereotyping of her characters. One of the few critics to pay attention to white characters in Morrison’s work, Furman finds that though the Streets fare poorly in all their relationships, they are not beyond redemption. Valerian, for example, is depicted as cynical and arrogant, but the guilt that accompanies his innocence keeps him from becoming a stereotypical character. Even Margaret emerges redeemed and with an actual identity once the truth about Michael’s abuse is revealed. Furman views Sidney and Ondine as power-hungry people whose pride and arrogance is responsible for Jadine’s cultural disconnectedness. She looks upon Jadine as a tar baby (created by Valerian, the white farmer) whose portrayal allows Morrison to voice her usual thematic concerns about the reconstruction of black womanhood, and the dangers inherent in the choices women make. She views
Son as Jadine's foil - embodying the black culture that she has discarded. He is a specimen of what she calls Morrison's "traveling man" - contending that he runs from Elo to because he is a fugitive. This view differs from that of Coleman's who says that there was nothing in Elo to hold Son back. Furman also provides a brief but interesting comparison between Jadine and Sula before finally concluding that Tar Baby is a "paradigm" of black/white relations, and confirms the status of blacks as survivors.

Beloved

Deborah Horvitz's article "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in Beloved" [Studies in American Fiction 17 (1989): 157-167] identifies the themes of the book as the degradation of slaves by slave-owners, mother-daughter relationships, and the effect of time and memory on a person's future. She sees Beloved as both mother and daughter to Sethe who not only allows her to speak the unspeakable, but also forces her to remember her own mother. The relationship between the two, however, recalls for both the slave-master relationship. First it is Sethe's sense of protection and possessiveness that leads to Beloved's murder; later, the grown Beloved transforms into a possessive tyrant trying to clutch Sethe in a death-like grip. Referring to the moral dilemma underlying Sethe's act, Horvitz argues that Morrison holds Sethe (rather than
the institution of slavery) responsible for the infanticide. She reads the novel as having a positive ending because the African and American Beloveds (signifying each other's matrilineal heritage and future) ultimately come together and bridge the gap between "America and Africa, the past and the present, the dead and the living, the flesh and the spirit." She contends that even though the dilemma of living a full life in the present without cancelling out the hurts of the past is not totally worked out toward the end of the novel, a sort of "healing" definitely takes place. This is manifested in Sethe's realisation that she is her own "best thing" - quite capable of finding happiness with Paul D, and in Denver's overcoming her fear and gaining a new self confidence. Even Beloved's story is ultimately "passed on" though she herself returns to the water.

such as urine, milk, blood." His central contention is that slavery deforms the speech of the body, and the book must "translate the crimes of slavery back into natural organic language" - thus reassembling "broken bodies, broken families, broken selves." He holds the traditional view that the unspeakable past must be spoken and exorcised before peace can come. He sees Morrison's characters as re-membering their bodies by affirming them - in spite of the system that fragments and abuses these very bodies. As each character crosses over from enslavement to freedom, she discovers and claims her own being as self rather than slave - a sense of ownership which culminates in language, e.g. Baby Suggs telling Garner her real name. Weinstein views Beloved's entry as "narrative magic" because it brings out into the open the repressed trauma of Sethe's infanticide. Throughout the novel, Beloved moves others, and re-fuses what violence and death have torn apart. Her return gives Denver a sister, Sethe a child and Paul D a "siring role." In Sethe's act of infanticide, Weinstein sees Morrison's "parable of motherhood: Sethe does not destroy her children, she saves them" - a fact confirmed by Beloved's return. On the flip side, however, is the possibility that Beloved may not really be Sethe's daughter - a fact supported by her referral to a real past on a slave ship.
As opposed to the literary styles of Horvitz's article and Weinstein's essay, James Berger's "Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison's Beloved and the Moynihan Report" [Publications of the Modern Language Association 3 (1996): 408-420] gives a decidedly political twist to Morrison's fifth novel by reading it as an intervention in and challenge to all American racial discourse of the 1980s. He examines Beloved in terms of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's controversial report "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," which described black urban life as a "tangle of pathology" - at the centre of which lay the "weakness of the family structure." Berger argues that Beloved looks upon the African American family as a site of violence, and is mostly concerned (like the liberals) with the traumatic effects of institutional racism. At the same time, however, Morrison also emphasises African American and feminist perspectives, and thus corrects such liberal errors as the denial of African American culture and agency, and the slighting of African American women. Berger sees Sethe's murder of Beloved as an apocalyptic scene which is both revelatory and catastrophic - demonstrating an act of unspeakable violence between blacks. Berger devotes the last section of the article to a brief review of the work of three critics with whom he disagrees because they claim that the exorcism of Beloved represents a successful working
through of America's racial traumas. He chooses, rather, to agree with Freud's theory that repressed or denied traumatic memories eventually return, and contends that even though the novel appears to indicate that the haunting is over, the last word, “Beloved,” shatters this assumption. Berger also wonders if Sethe's attack on Bodwin can be viewed as an attack on white liberals. He believes that Morrison links Bodwin with a view of 1960s liberalism seen from a 1980s perspective. Though Bodwin is an abolitionist, the black boy statuette in his house points to racist tendencies. Morrison depicts him as a vain and self-absorbed man interested in abolitionism only because it makes him feel morally superior to others. He remains blind to the interests and culture of African Americans. Ultimately, however, he contends that Morrison wants the reader to recognise Bodwin's contribution and realise that Sethe's attack on him is delusional. Being a traumatised woman, she (like the Leftist attackers of liberalism) mistakes him for someone else.

**Jazz**

In the article “Women Who Run with Wild: The Need for Sisterhoods in Jazz” [Modern Fiction Studies 39 (1993): 623-646] Doreatha Drummond Mbalia argues that African women are as wild today as they were in the 1920s because they still encounter
the same exploitation and race/gender oppression that they did years ago. She contends that Morrison blends theme and structure (just as jazz music combines song and singer) to suggest that African people must unite to combat oppression and exploitation. She explains that "Wild" in Jazz signifies "defiance, rebelliousness, aggressiveness, selfishness and silence." The wildness of Joe's mother is reflected in all the female characters - a disturbing trend because these women represent the cultivators and nurturers of the family unit. Mbalia attributes this "wildness" to the circumstances under which such women have had to live. Violet's harsh childhood, for example, results in the breakdown of her concept of "African womanhood." Dorcas's "inside nothing" is caused by the violent deaths of both her parents. Alice's isolation from African life and ignorance of African history create in her a fear of life and men. Mbalia also indicates the irony inherent in the great migration North. She regards Northern cities as wild places where racism was alive, and where Africans became silent, selfish and individualistic. She sees the narrator as a female character similar to the other heroines because she also experiences growth and has a little Wild in her. Mbalia concludes that through Jazz, Morrison makes clear once again that arriving at solutions for the dilemma of African people still remains her first priority.
Where Mbalia’s article examined the sociological thread running through *Jazz*, Jan Furman’s essay “City Blues: *Jazz*” [*Toni Morrison’s Fiction* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996) 85-103] concentrates more on characterisation. She looks upon Joe as a variation on Morrison’s “prototypical male” and Violet as a “study in madness” - who tries hard to keep her life in balance. She views Morrison’s depiction of Violet’s life as a representation of the lives of black women who have been wronged. The crimes of Joe and Violet are redeemed by “suffering and by spiritual enlightenment.” Commenting on the elusive narrator of *Jazz*, whom she sees as female, Furman says that she is different from Morrison’s other narrators because she narrates in the first person, but is not a character in the novel - a point of view which would place her in strong disagreement with Mbalia. She also finds the narrator’s comments unreliable because they are a personification of the impersonal authorial voice. With the exception of the perceptive section on the narrator of *Jazz*, the rest of the essay is disappointing because Furman mostly retells the story without providing any real insight into the text.

Much more comprehensive and analytical than Mbalia’s article and Furman’s essay is “Traces and Cracks: Identity and Narrative in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*” [*African American Review* 31
(1997): 481-495] by Carolyn M. Jones. She successfully works through Joe's traces and Violet's cracks to their reconstructions of identity through Dorcas. She also examines Golden Gray and the Wild in the context of their relationship to these reconstructions.

Jones views Jazz as a novel in which Morrison combines the "movement of music and the structure of tragedy," i.e. she uses the improvisational quality of music to deconstruct the form of tragedy, allowing a reconstruction of identity to emerge that is not determined but fluid and improvisational. In Jazz Morrison retells the story of Beloved, which she regards as the essential story of the black experience in America. It begins with the fracturing of human psyches, souls and bodies in slavery, and causes one to devalue the self and to locate the best of the self in an "other": the beloved. In Jazz Morrison symbolises this fracture through Violet's cracks and Joe's traces. The narrator of Jazz brings these cracks and traces together in the centerpiece of the novel - the story of Golden Gray and the Wild - the myth of the primordial parents. Dorcas becomes the beloved in Jazz – signifying the absent parents, the lover who invokes loneliness, the child that Joe and Violet decide not to have. Jones sees Violet and Joe as having opposite but complimentary problems, and contends that Morrison brings their stories together through the metaphor of jazz. The novel ultimately
becomes a site of performance, of interaction between reader and writer with the text as an instrument both played and heard. She concludes that identity, narrative, voice, and their relationship are all redefined in Jazz.

General Articles

In the article "The Novels of Toni Morrison: Studies in Thwarted Sensitivity," [Studies in Black Literature 6 (1975): 21-23] Joan Bischoff writes that Toni Morrison's first two books The Bluest Eye and Sula essentially provide different answers to the same question: "What is to become of a finely attuned child who is offered no healthy outlet for her aspirations and yearnings?" She contends that the stories of Pecola and Sula are ultimately the same because the deep sensitivity inherent in their characters becomes a curse rather than a blessing. It makes them vulnerable, and since both have problems of self-image and identity, they feel isolated from society which finally refuses to accept them. Pecola reacts by trying harder to win approval. Sula deliberately rejects the outside world and begins to rely only on herself. For both, their sensitivity is a liability rather than an asset, and not at all conducive to healthy survival in a world dominated by prejudiced images of beauty and wealth. Pecola retreats into madness. Sula becomes a recluse and social outcast. Bischoff concludes that Morrison views sensitivity as
Jacqueline de Weever’s article "The Inverted World of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* [College Language Association Journal 22 (1979): 414] may be seen as an expansion of the themes outlined by Bischoff. It studies the ways in which Morrison’s novels present an upside down world where values and desires are inverted because of the black woman’s need to transform her identity by conforming to pre-existing (white) standards of beauty. This leads to a severe identity crisis, and the women find it extremely difficult to come out of the dilemma they are in. In *The Bluest Eye*, the inversion manifests itself in Pecola’s desire for blue eyes, and the ensuing wish to become white. de Weever contends that all the pre-existing norms and assumed parameters of beauty and prosperity force the Breedloves’s life to become an inversion of the values mentioned in the Primer. In *Sula*, the author finds that the inverted world shows itself in the positive reactions of the people to negative characters or events - especially after Sula’s return to Medallion when wives begin cherishing hitherto ignored husbands and sons - in spite of the fact that they often show deviant behaviour. She points to another form of the inversion of values in this novel when Sula wastes her college education by being unemployed and doing nothing - whereas the uneducated men
seek meaningful jobs. She concludes that Morrison depicts the helplessness of Pecola and Sula in the face of the ambiguities and paradoxes of their lives. Neither is able to establish an identity because the society they live in does not acknowledge their existence. The inverted world in which Pecola lives makes it impossible for her to find a self, and in Sula's case, leads to her death. The author mourns the bleakness of Morrison's vision.

Though Jane S. Bakerman's article continues the general theme of deprivation elaborated in the work of Bischoff and de Weever, her focus is on love. "Failures of Love: Female Initiation in the Novels of Toni Morrison" [American Literature 52 (1981): 541-63] discusses Morrison's first three novels and suggests that successful initiation (the finding of genuine values in life) eludes the heroines of The Bluest Eye, Sula and Song of Solomon because they fail to achieve either romantic or platonic love. Pecola is raped by her father. Sula is rejected by Ajax. Jude leaves Nel. Milkman rejects Hagar, and Pilate is not able to grasp the meaning of her Father's dying words. Had these encounters with other human beings developed and flourished as proper relationships, these characters may have found some meaning to their existence, and thus been successfully initiated into life. They, however, face dismal failure at every step, and hence remain incomplete. Only in
Song of Solomon does Bakerman see a glimmer of hope for happiness because First Corinthians might, at a much later stage, develop a positive relationship with Porter.

Pursuing themes entirely different from those mentioned above, Edward Guerrero introduces his article “Tracking ‘The Look’ in the Novels of Toni Morrison” [Black American Literature Forum 24 (1990): 761-773] by drawing upon the work of feminist and cultural critics to define “the look” as “the representation of woman as an eroticized, fetishized, and generally commodified object that is displayed for the enjoyment of a controlling male ‘look’ or gaze.” He asserts that in the novels of Toni Morrison, this look goes on to become “the controlling gaze” of the superior white (and male) culture which looks condescendingly down on the African American culture, and not only brings about sexual objectification, but also brands it as inferior in terms of race and class. Guerrero contends that this concept of “the look” manifests itself in various ways in the novels of Toni Morrison. In The Bluest Eye, for example, he finds that Morrison holds the concept of “the look” responsible for the destruction of Pecola and the disillusionment of other characters—both male and female like Cholly and Pauline Breedlove. It is for this reason that her first novel contains the severest criticism of Western beauty. In Sula, “the look” becomes the difference between
seeing and watching. Nel watches the accidental drowning of Chicken Little at Sula's hands, just as Sula watches her mother burn in the yard. These episodes reveal a latent sadism inherent in the characters of the two friends. In this book too, "the look" affects a male character - Shadrack - who comes to terms with the reality of being a black male, and is therefore able to rid himself of the schizophrenia which had plagued him since the war. As opposed to this positive reaction, Hagar, in *Song of Solomon*, undergoes traumatic experience, then death, because of "the look." Guerrero argues that such an approach leads to self-negation, and compels Hagar to reject the important traditional values and lifestyles of Pilate and Reba - creating, instead, a craving for white characteristics of beauty which, she believes, will endear her to the male gaze. The author then goes on to examine the case of Jadine, the heroine of *Tar Baby*. He states that since she is a fashion model, she is depicted as the "narcissistic, exhibitionistic, commodified, and professional object of the male gaze." Her attributes as a well-educated young woman are therefore undermined, and become mere tools to make her more alluring to the magazine's audience. This ultra-modern look is contrasted with the traditional but powerful features of the African woman in the canary-yellow dress, whom Jadine cannot help but admire.
Guerrero finds that *Beloved* is the only one of Morrison's novels that does not continue what he calls the “narrative exploration of looking relations.” He attributes this to the fact that the media did not exist in quite so intense and powerful a form during the time in which the novel is set. He does quote one example, however, where he believes that Morrison “historicizes ‘the look’ of the oppressor....” This episode occurs when the black community spots some slave catchers, and recognises the look of domination and pretentious righteousness in their eyes.

Timothy B. Powell's essay “Toni Morrison: The Struggle to Depict the Black Figure on the White Page” [*Black American Literature Forum* 24 (1990): 747-760] finds a common thread running through the first three novels of Toni Morrison whose central concern in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* is to depict a quest for black identity. This urge has been precipitated by the strong ethnocentrism inherent in the Western Literary Tradition since the time of Plato who claimed that the followers of the white horse (Plato's metaphor for the soul) will “live in light always” but those who follow the black horse will be doomed “to go down again to darkness.” Powell contends that this connotation of black or dark as evil, negative, absent must be overcome if the “black self” has to be recognised as “presence, affirmation, and
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good.” The black logos must, in essence, be released from “the semantic shadows of the Master's language” - which means that black meanings inherent in the English language must also be recognised and understood as such. According to the author, Toni Morrison has attempted to do exactly this in The Bluest Eye and Sula, and achieved it fully in Song of Solomon, and has thus succeeded in creating a “(w)holy black text.”

Just as Powell’s article focused on the quest for black identity, Malin LaVon Walther’s “Out of Sight: Toni Morrison’s Revision of Beauty” [Black American Literature Forum 24 (1990): 775-789] examines the new concept of (black) beauty presented by Morrison. She contends that the work of feminist critics like Luce Irigaray, while discussing the objectification of women, generally assumes a “universal” standard of beauty, and presupposes the entrapment of only white females in the “male gaze.” Morrison, however, uses her work - both fictional and non-fictional - to redefine beauty as white feminists know it, and to force them to reconsider the parameters upon which their concept of beauty and the specular system is based. Walther integrates the contents of Morrison’s essay “What the Black Woman Thinks About Women’s Lib,” with the themes of her novels to demonstrate that she redefines the concept of beauty by linking it directly to ‘usefulness,’
the essential realities of the body, and "racial authenticity." Walther looks upon The Bluest Eye as Morrison's severest critique of the specular system and her rejection of beauty as defined by white standards, propagated by popular media, and appreciated by both black and white women alike. In Song of Solomon, the author finds that Morrison redefines the concept of female beauty, and insists that its basic foundation should lie in racial identity. She examines Morrison's fourth novel to reveal that issues of "artifice, nature versus nurture, the gaze, sexuality, racial identity and commercial images of female beauty" merge to make the concept of beauty and the specular system central themes of Tar Baby. It is in this context of prevailing values that Morrison unveils a new definition of black female beauty - using as her vehicles the marginal characters of the woman in yellow, Therese, and even the island landscape (which she considers as a character because of the author's rich personification of the surroundings). Walther sees Morrison as using the characters of Margaret and Jadine to critique white concepts of beauty, and to illustrate the internalisation of these standards by the black community respectively. At the end of the essay she suggests that Margaret's life becomes useful and meaningful when she sheds artificial make-up and takes the reins of the house into her own hands. She concludes that this drastic
transformation reiterates Morrison's point that true beauty incorporates the reality of both the body and the racial experience - which can neither be “objectified, represented, or appropriated.”

In the article “The Mellow Moods and Difficult Truths of Toni Morrison” [The Southern Review 29 (1993): 614-28] Marilyn Sanders Mobley credits Morrison's work with being different from that of other black authors because she delves deep into African American and American history and culture to explore issues that others have left unexamined. She contends that Morrison not only highlights the damaging effects of racism and sexism, but also shows how it distorts the self-image of African American girls and women. In each of her novels Morrison steps into a different cultural or historical moment and meditates on contemporary African American life. Just as she finds The Bluest Eye to be an example of Morrison's meditation on beauty, and a record of how black people attempt to take control of their lives, Mobley reads Sula as a meditation on “female friendship, race and power, mothering and family, individual identity and community responsibility.” In Song of Solomon, she finds a meditation on identity, and a chronicling of the African American journey from enslavement to freedom. This meditation becomes stronger in Tar Baby as it widens to expose conflicts arising out of the encounters
between the coloniser and the colonised. Mobley sees in *Beloved* the detrimental effects of slavery on black women's choices about love and maternity. Inscribed on the bodies of ex-slave women are gruesome stories that male slave narratives have never told. There is, however, a glimmer of hope in *Beloved* because in spite of the horrors that they had to face, slaves could still find it in their hearts to love themselves and each other, and come to Sethe’s rescue as she fights for her sanity and her life. Mobley feels intrigued by the wordplay in *Jazz*, and appreciates the way that the novel resembles this form of black music structurally. Thematically, she sees it as a critique of the “political realities of black life during the 1920s” and a celebration of the “cultural resources African Americans drew on to survive and thrive.”

Mobley lauds Morrison’s attempt to bring to the fore the hidden signs of racism in the great canonical works of American literature in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. She compliments Morrison for highlighting the fact that most of these works assume white readers, and proceed accordingly - so that they become racist texts - even though on the surface they may seem to be about everything but race. Morrison has done great service to readers by breaking the silence about the inherent racism hidden in some of the greatest works of American literature like
Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

**Books on Morrison**

*Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985], a collection of essays edited by Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers presents a systematic study of the literary tradition in the fiction of African American women writers like Ann Petry, Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison and a few others. The two essays most relevant to the present study are “Lady No Longer Sings the Blues: Rape, Madness and Silence in *The Bluest Eye*” by Madonne M. Miner, and “Recitation to the Griot: Storytelling and Learning in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*” by Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr. Miner traces the sequence of events (rape, madness, silence) in *The Bluest Eye* to similar sequences in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (8 A.D.) and some versions of Homer's Persephone story. She draws parallels between Pecola, Philomela and Persephone, and suggests that Morrison's very contemporary novel is structured around these ancient archetypes. Skerrett contends that though Morrison is “contemporary,” “literary” and “experimental,” her work is firmly rooted in the traditional culture of the African American
community. This essay revolves around the basic premise that *Song of Solomon* is a fictional replication of the various folk processes of communication - especially story-telling. Story-telling plays a key role in *Song of Solomon* because it enables the protagonist to learn more about himself and his roots. It is only after listening to countless stories from numerous people that Milkman, according to Skerrett, finally matures, and is able to take possession of his heritage.

This focus on mythology and cultural history is replaced by a metaphoric reading of Morrison’s novels in *The Novels of Toni Morrison: Explorations in Literary Criticism* [Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1985] by Bessie W. Jones and Audrey L. Vinson. The authors argue that each novel reveals certain metaphors of escape in various traditional and innovative ways. In *The Bluest Eye*, for example, the metaphors are unveiled through the predominant imagery of blue eyes. The other peripheral images are those of birds, costumes, colours, and the street. All these combine to contribute to the development of the plot. In *Sula*, the authors find that the metaphor of escape is provided by the supernatural elements inherent in the story. They contend that the Peace women try to escape reality by exploiting it. Vinson and Jones also find manifestations of the supernatural in *Song of Solomon* - especially
in the concept of the flying African. Pilate's smooth ("navelless") stomach, and her conjuring - all of which reveal a desire to escape the present, and embark on the exciting journey toward self-discovery. In Tar Baby, elements of the supernatural can be found in Son's incredible swim, the wild horsemen, and the unending flow of milk in Therese's bosom. As far as form and structure are concerned, the authors credit Morrison's work with containing metaphors of escape in the form of such rhetorical devices as "point of view, syllogistic thought, negations and ambivalence." Multiple points of view like those of Pilate, Ruth Dead, Macon Dead, and Circe are required, for example, to convey Milkman's search of the self in Song of Solomon. Negations abound in Sula, and can be witnessed in the naming of a mountain as the "Bottom" and a white man as "Tar Baby." Ambivalence can be witnessed in the characters of both Sula and The Bluest Eye. Shadrack's neat cottage, for example, is totally opposite in nature to his other aberrant characteristics, and Soaphead both hates and is fascinated by disorder or decay. The authors argue further that Morrison's statements about morality, virtue and justice, combined with the suffering that her characters undergo, and the knowledge that they eventually gain from it, makes it valid for her work to be examined from the standpoint of Greek Tragedy. Jones explores this concept
fully in the eighth chapter entitled "Greek Tragic Motifs in Song of Solomon" - where she finds that the Dead family seems doomed by a "family curse, ancestral guilt and incestuous relations."

Structurally too, the novel incorporates a chorus and the achieving of an epiphany, but it does not fall into the strict tragic design codified by Aristotle because the hero overcomes all adversity, and emerges triumphant in the end.

The book Critical Essays on Toni Morrison [Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1988] edited by Nellie Y. McKay includes reviews of and critical articles on The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon and Tar Baby. Of particular relevance to the present study are the essays “Roadblocks and Relatives: Critical revision in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye” - by Michael Awkward, “The Self and the Other: Reading Toni Morrison’s Sula and the Black Feminine Text,” by Deborah E. McDowell, “The Fabulous World of Toni Morrison: Tar Baby,” by Eleanor W. Traylor, and “The Convergence of Feminism and Ethnicity in the Fiction of Toni Morrison” by Carolyn DenaYd. Awkward claims that The Bluest Eye is a revisionist rendering of the works of such authors as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and Zora Neale Hurston. He provides, as evidence, the inclusion of the themes of incest and adjustment as well as Claudia’s dismemberment of white dolls - all of which occur in
different contexts and situations in the work of Ellison, Wright and Baldwin. He contends that this revisionist practice clears various roadblocks that Morrison might have faced, and allows her to create a novel in which “nationalist and feminist concerns combine to produce what Morrison elsewhere has called a ‘genuine Black...Book.’” Awkward also claims that this revisionist tendency has allowed Morrison to “change permanently the overwhelmingly male disposition of the Afro-American literary canon.” McDowell’s assertion is that the Self has almost always been projected as “positive” and “right,” whereas the ‘Other,’ is almost always seen as “negative” and “bad.” She contends that Morrison’s narrative Sula blurs the margins between such binary oppositions as the “self” and the “other.” This allows the script to go beyond the boundaries of social and linguistic conventions, and enables the reader to look at character as a process rather than an individual, self-centered self. Traylor looks upon Tar Baby as a fable in which values are juxtaposed and exposed. She throws light upon that aspect of Tar Baby which shows how other people “measure” women and men, and determine whether they are “good” or “bad.” The author claims that Tar Baby, as a narrative, represents women from all walks of life - the warrior women, the market women, the calabash-carrying women, the queen women, the life-bearing, culture-bearing women -
whose images she sees in the women mentioned in the dedication. These are the women who disapprove of Jadine's behaviour and reject her as a person because she has forgotten her "true and ancient properties" and does not, therefore, belong with them. Denard writes that Morrison celebrates in her novels the unique feminine cultural values that black women have developed in spite of or because of their oppression. Pecola, Sula and Jadine are, however, not the real heroines according to her. That role is better fulfilled by Mrs. MacTeer, Eva, Pilate and Ondine because they are the "Tar Women" who have an inherent ability ("consistency") to hold their families and communities together. She concludes by saying that in her role as ethnic cultural feminist, Morrison has sought to reinforce the value that racism and sexism continually try to take away from the beauty, work, and cultural values of black women. Also included in Critical Essays on Toni Morrison is an essay titled "Straining to Make Out the Words of the 'Lied': The German Perception of Toni Morrison" - by Anne Adams. To take the German connection further, Rosemarie K. Lester's interview with Toni Morrison, aired on the Hessian Radio Network, appears in this Collection as an interesting and informative interview essay.

In Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison [Knoxville: The University of Nashville Press, 1991]. Trudier
Harris argues that Morrison creates "literary folklore" in her novels by transforming historical folk materials before incorporating them into the text. This means that only slim outlines or general patterns of traditional folklore can be recognised in her work. They are, however, almost always "reconceptualized" and "restructured" and cannot, therefore, be found in any documented source as such. It is primarily this particular trait that distinguishes Morrison from other African American writers before her (Waddell Chesnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison) who also adapted folklore into their fiction. Through a number of essays on The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby and Beloved, Harris reaches the conclusion that Morrison's work can easily be placed in the particular context of Afro-American folklore because the novels share with it a "striking male-centered perspective." When viewed within this frame of reference, her treatment of women takes on new meaning, signifies wider implications. Harris cites, as example, the fact that the traditional qualities bestowed upon men by folklore are attributed by Morrison to her rebel heroines. Female sacrifice at the altar of male desire forms as important a part of Morrison's novels as of African American folklore. She argues convincingly that in all of Morrison's novels, as in traditional folklore, men shape women's characters or lives; male ideas define female roles, and
most female characters are viewed as witches and scapegoats. Toward the end of the book Harris pays the ultimate complement to Morrison by suggesting that she constantly "creates new myths and new ways of perceiving what we mean by 'folk.'" In addition to these well-thought-out essays, the book also contains detailed notes and a comprehensive bibliography. It is an invaluable companion for any Morrison scholar.

Just as Harris studied the folkloric elements in Morrison's work, Doreatha D. Mbalia's book *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness* [Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1991] seeks to find a connection between all the novels to support the thesis that there are "developmental patterns" in the Morrison canon, and "one work picks up where the other one leaves off, thematically and structurally." According to Mbalia, Morrison begins by exploring racism in *The Bluest Eye* and then takes up the concept of gender oppression in *Sula*. The crucial role played by family, community, race history and heritage in the development of an individual's personality is persuasively examined in *Song of Solomon*. *Tar Baby* goes on to pinpoint imperialism and capitalism as the worst enemies of African people, and also pleads for the abolition of class contradictions (within the race) that keep Africans divided. *Beloved*, finally, elaborates fully the need for solidarity
among all the people of African descent, no matter where they reside. Mbali integrates the theories of Kwame Nkrumah and Karl Marx with the text of her book - not only to demonstrate the plight of the African people but also to show how literary authors like Morrison can help to highlight and eventually suggest solutions to their problems. Mbali concludes by pointing to certain key questions which, she contends, have remained unanswered in Morrison's books. What, for example, are the African people struggling for? How and why is a land base or united homeland important in the African struggle for survival and, finally, how can scientific socialism benefit Africans the world over?

Edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K.A. Appiah, *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* [New York: Amistad, 1993] contains fifteen essays on Morrison's work as well as several book reviews reprinted from the popular press. Also included are four comprehensive interviews with the author - conducted by scholars like Nellie McKay, Robert B. Stepto, Thomas LeClair and Christina Davis. These interviews present Morrison's views on aspects of her work that have baffled critics and readers alike. They also provide an insight into Morrison's concept of the art of writing, society, and the importance of folklore and heritage. The essays examine various aspects of Morrison's work - ranging
from the problems faced by her heroines or her use of counter-texts
to the sense of place in her novels or the narrative problems in her
texts. Barbara Christian's essay "The Contemporary Fables of Toni
Morrison" examines The Bluest Eye and Sula as texts that
illustrate the struggles of African American girls as they travel on
the rocky road to womanhood. "Beyond Realism," the essay by
Keith E. Byerman, lauds both the stability of Morrison's characters
and the reliability of her narrators. He also suggests that by
portraying the evil effects of familiar, everyday things like popular
culture, the family, the past, love, sex roles, etc., Morrison's first
four novels defamiliarize the reader. Byerman argues convincingly
that Morrison projects society and community values that condition
the character to act and behave in a specific way." In her essay,
"Maternal Narratives: 'Cruel Enough to Stop the Blood,'" Marianne
Hirsch argues that the writing of black women has mostly been
careracterised by the "daughterly tradition," i.e. authors writing as
daughters rather than mothers. In Sula and Beloved, however,
there is a definite "confrontation and interaction of maternal and
daughterly voices." She suggests that when mothers speak, their
voices or stories enhance the text and enrich the characterisation of
the protagonist daughters." These essays provide but a glimpse
into the variety and depth of others of their kind that constitute this
Collection. Together with the reviews and interviews, they combine to make *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* one of the most comprehensive critical works on Morrison.

Linden Peach's book *Toni Morrison* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995] begins with an introduction in which the author suggests that the best approach to Morrison's novels is a biographical one. Agreeing with Mbalia, he says that Morrison's family background, places of residence, college, university, jobs, and even the fact that she had to bring up her sons alone - all had a direct effect on her work. Her novels, moreover, are "evolutionary, circular, repetitive, contradictory and ambiguous." They cannot, therefore, lend themselves to such concepts of European literary criticism as "linearity, progress and chronology." In his own reading of the novels, however, Peach concentrates on Morrison's technique - stating confidently that the innovative form is "driven by" the radical content. In *The Bluest Eye*, for example, he finds that Morrison uses a language "enmeshed with power structures" in order to show how inappropriate white values are for judging black culture. The content and form, similarly, run together in *Sula* too. Where there is silence between Sula and Nel, for example, no narrative voice intrudes. The language also helps to support the ambiguity that is a part of the book: what exactly did the mark on
Sula's eye look like? Or, which one of the stories about Eva's leg is true? The author also points to the significance of the names used by Morrison in her second novel. Following a train of thought with which Jones and Vinson would agree, he looks upon *Song of Solomon* as a "dialogical" novel in which a particular character or event is viewed from various perspectives. It is unique in terms of both form and content because it combines elements of American and European Romance with African myth, African ontology, and African American concerns. In *Tar Baby* Peach finds the language "elusive." Simple words like 'family' and 'bank' are found to have multiple meanings. Drawing upon Michael Bakhtin's work, the author argues that the language of *Tar Baby* is not "unified," "fixed" or "stable" - rather, as a social and historical process, it is always in a state of flux. For his study of Morrison's fifth book, Peach turns to the work of Roland Barthes, and says that *Beloved* is a fragmentary novel. Like Seth's stories, the language too gives the impression of being scattered across various pages - but always sustained and composed of black discourse. The author also comments upon Morrison's use of Biblical language to support the nature of the content. According to Peach, *Jazz* moves both backwards and forward. Though the writing is variously informed by certain qualities of jazz music, there are other aspects of the language too.
When Morrison has to convey an image of people watching each other suspiciously, for example, she uses a language that expresses apprehension or fear. When loneliness has to be conveyed, the language is again made to switch to the appropriate mode.

The articles, essays and books reviewed in this chapter examined Morrison's novels from various angles and points of view. This incredible body of criticism not only makes a statement about the varied interests and creativity of the contemporary scholar, but also pays tribute to the versatility of Morrison's prose which makes such diverse readings possible. But such breadth of vision is not without problems. Ever since she won the Nobel Prize, scholars have been struggling to place Morrison within an appropriate existing literary tradition. Though convenience demands that she be placed within the context of the African American canon by virtue of her birth, origins, and dominant themes, critics realise that such a categorisation would be cultural or sociological rather than literary. In a deeply insightful article, Malin LaVon Walther has identified “race, gender, comparative American/Western literature, or ‘universal’ paradigms”¹ as the major contexts in light of which Morrison's work is generally read. She argues, however, that to position her strictly within any one of these canons would be

to limit the scope of her work. This chapter has taken a similar
stand, and previous pages have made clear that each reading of
Morrison's novels, no matter how different from the other, is
perfectly valid in itself. To conclude, therefore, it would be
appropriate to say that Morrison, by virtue of the very nature of her
work, defies canonisation. She seems to belong everywhere and
nowhere. Though rooted in specificity, her themes lend themselves
to a variety of critical interpretations without seeming to fall into
any particular category. It is this elusive nature of her work that
the following chapters have attempted to capture and explore.